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AUTHOR Beene, LynnDianne
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ABSTRACT

Questions raised by the misinterpretations evidenced in the final examination essays of a freshman English class should lead teachers to a new understanding of how the phrasing of writing assignments influences what students write. Some of the questions included: (1) How detailed must an assignment be to communicate its goals? (2) What type of detail is needed? (3) To which sections of assignments do students pay the most attention? (4) How much difference does audience, purpose, or mode make on students' writing? and (5) How can teachers be sure that they, themselves, fully recognize the purpose of a particular writing assignment? Researchers have found that assignments asking for less challenging modes of discourse, such as relating ideas, did not produce better or worse essays than did assignments asking for more challenging modes of discourse, such as evaluating ideas. Students have been known to center their attention on phrases or sentences in a writing assignment that teachers may have provided as background information, rather than on salient parts of the assignment. Researchers have also noted that people learned to write because they had to: when they had something to write about, when the need for writing was immediate, and when they had an audience they knew needed the communication. This observation may lay the foundation for further research into improving the clarity of writing assignments. (A list of works on writing assignments is included.) (AEW)

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Writing Assignments: What We Know We Don't Know

LynnDianne Beene

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Writing Assignments: What We Know We Don't Know

Recently, a colleague and I found ourselves chagrined over student responses to a writing assignment we thought was excellent. We were serving on a panel assigning pass/fail grades to the essays students wrote for the final examination in UNM's English 102 course: Analytic and Argumentative Writing. This essay examination serves two purposes: first, as the final examination for the course and, second, as an "exit" examination required of all undergraduates by the University to satisfy the somewhat ambiguously defined "English writing proficiency requirement." My colleague and I knew the care that went into selecting readings for the students to study for the exam and into framing the writing assignments the students would respond to. After all, as humanists we wanted the writing assignments to elicit clear, logical, and (hopefully?) meaningful prose from the students. It would make our job easier, and the students could continue their degree programs with at least some sense of what analysis and argumentation are.

For this particular examination the writing faculty had selected, in addition to two general essays, W.H. Auden's poem "Unknown Citizen." The examination started with a lengthy statement telling students that the panel graders, the freshmen English faculty, would evaluate their essays for clear organization, careful development of the ideas, adequate support, and appropriate grammar. It reminded the students that they had a choice of questions, based on readings they had studied in class, and that they should select a topic and address just that

topic. The writing assignment, one I helped to create, began with a five-line quotation from the poem and then instructed the students to analyze Auden's position:

> He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be
> One against whom there was no official complaint,
> And all the reports on his conduct agree
> That, in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a saint,
> For in everything he did he served the Greater Community.
>
> These lines from Auden's "Unknown Citizen" describe one characteristic of the Unknown Citizen; other characteristics are mentioned elsewhere in the poem. Write an essay in which you analyze how typical and how valuable such citizens as Auden describes in the poem are to the world.

The writing assignment met the necessary criteria for a workable assignment, criteria we had studied in published literature and tested through trial-and-error in the classroom:

--It was one of several options on the examination, all of which were purposeful and measurable.

--It was based on a reading assignment that students had just studied in their writing classes.

--It was clearly written with complete instructions indicating exactly how the essays would be judged and what the students were to write. Because we feared students might misinterpret the assignment, the Freshman English Director and I had taken care to limit injunctions and yet to emphasize the grading standards: content and organization were more important criteria for successfully completing the assignment than spelling errors and sentence fragments. We used directive verbs and specified the purpose (i.e., display analytic writing ability), the audience (the students' freshman English teachers), and the mode (analysis rather than argument or literary intepretation).

--It asked students to form a thesis based on their observation and thinking and to support that thesis using information in the passage rather than personal information or knowledge they might not have.

--It elicited directed speculation rather than true/false, yes/no answers or fragmentary responses.

--It exploited communication theory's paradigm: students (the writers) were writing to teachers (the readers) in a text (the essay) that related a message (an analysis) about something (Auden's citizens).

--It was the culminating assignment in a sequenced approach to writing -- one that began in English 101 with explanatory and summarizing essays and escalated in English 102 to critical summaries, analyses, and arguments. Thus, it was appropriate to both the structure and development of the writing program and to the students' educational level. Further, it required students to provide a discourse mode they could reasonably be expected to provide--one of two they had studied all semester.

--It gave students a chance to do their best work, to write their best essays of the semester.

What could possibly go wrong?

My colleague, a talented poet as well as a respected writing teacher, leaned over the examination papers he was grading and chuckled. He then grew more serious and lamented that other instructors hadn't been able to teach the Auden poem correctly. He'd given failing marks to most of the responses to the Auden question he'd read because, as he said, "most of the essays on this assignment have detailed how valuable the Unknown Citizen is to society, how he is the backbone, the standard, the good citizen who reports to work on time, does his job, pays his taxes, obeys the laws, and rears his children to follow his example. Our less experienced teachers must have misread the poem and so taught it incorrectly. What a shame that the students must suffer for their teachers' errors!"

His humor and graciousness disappeared when I pointed out to him that, without realizing it, he was grading essays from his own section of 102.

A few minutes later, the panel took a break to discuss an recurring problems we found with the essays. Everyone of the panel graders echoed my colleague's complaint: how could teachers have misread Auden so badly! Quickly we realized that the problem was not the poem, the teachers, or even the

students. The poem is clear; the teachers had taught it correctly; and, importantly, the students were responding to the writing assignment. The problem was the writing assignment: it was unsuccessful because, in J.L. Austin's words, it was a "botched" effort at communication.

In published research, in conferences like the CCCC, and in our informal discussions over coffee, we have made much of how to write workable writing assignments. Many of our discussions support our sense that students write better essays if the assignments are directed, sequenced, and designate at least an intended audience, a purpose, and a mode of discourse. But when we examine these assumptions more directly, we begin to see what we don't know -- and we begin to ask questions. That's what I'd like to do this afternoon. I'd like to suggest some questions we should ask about composing writing assignments, questions that will lead us to a new understanding of how writing assignments influences what our students write and how communicative their texts are.

Question 1:

When creating writing assignments, one area of concern is completeness: how detailed should an assignment be to communicate its goals? Many of us believe -- or were taught -- that the more information we provide in the assignment, the better the essay the students will write. For example, when I was a graduate student taking a required Teaching Composition course, the professor repeatedly made us revise our writing assignments telling us that assignments were teaching tools and that "more was better!" The professor, a composition specialist

with an extensive background in linguistics, insisted on clarity and completeness: he argued that we should give our students instructions that included expectations, suggested strategies, and warnings about possible problems. Such instructions guided freshmen writers, showing them ways to organize and develop their writing and encouraging them to write effective essays. These successes, he continued, would eventually become a part of our students' repertoire of writing skills and we could, late in the semester, compose shorter instructions because of the skills our students had gained from our earlier efforts.

Yet many of these beliefs are untested. We aren't really sure how long our instructions and writing assignments should be if they are to teach students. We aren't entirely sure how assignments teach students or if they should be used for this reason. For example, if we give students detailed instructions and assignments, do we stifle their composing abilities by overwhelming them with information? Some researchers [Purves, et al., 1985] even suggest that more specific assignments are not necessarily preferable to less specific ones because more specific assignments encourage uniformity rather than critical thinking from students.

Question 2:

What type of detail is needed? We don't know exactly how students are influenced by the wording in writing assignments, what sections of assignments students pay most attention to, or how students interpret the hints teachers put in assignments. For example, in the Auden assignment we obviously meant the clause "other characteristics are mentioned elsewhere in the

poem" as a hint; however, students who paid attention to it saw it as an instruction to summarize Auden's list of characteristics rather than as a way to support their analysis of the value of Auden's unknown citizens. And we're unsure about how much information on prewriting should go into assignments. It seems reasonable that information on brainstorming, thesis formation, and strategies for approaching a topic would increase students' chances of writing communicative prose. However, we don't yet know if this is so. The principal obstacle for many students is thinking of what to write. How do extensive instructions affect this obstacle?

Question 3:

Another area of concern is rhetorical information. How much difference does audience, purpose, or mode make on students' writing? There is evidence that controlling these variables in an assignment may not make a major differences in writing students' behavior. For example, in one study researchers Patrick Woodworth and Catherine Keech found that designating audience didn't matter: whether the assignment indicated "no audience," an "imaginary audience," or a "real" audience, students wrote for the teacher/critic who would evaluate the essay.

One highly recommended type of writing assignment, the case assignment, suggests writing tasks by making the student a character in the narrative or case. Technical and business writing teachers advocate case assignments because they emulate "real world" writing situations and can promote detailed audience analysis. Composition teachers also appreciate the defined

audiences that case assignments provide. Furthermore, case assignments, by taking some of the burden for invention off the students, allow students to concentrate on organization, development, sentence structure, and diction. Composition teachers also know that before students can learn to write critically, they must be able to read with understanding and to remember what they read. Case assignments encourage these skills.

But case assignments may have the same drawbacks that more detailed traditional writing assignments have. For example, depending on how an audience views a document, "real world" writing tasks can be judged by different criteria than classroom writing assignments. A recent incident illustrates this point. I received a letter from a local health club that is going bankrupt; the letter persuaded me to pay a higher fee for their services to keep their doors open and my exercise classes going. If a student had submitted this letter in response to a writing assignment, I would have failed it for poor structure, paragraphing, and grammar. Would the student, faced with a failing business, consciously manipulate style, try different rhetorical strategies, try to discover different methods or techniques in his writing or try his best to get more money from the reader?

Designating an audience may not only fail to help students, it could mislead them. We could be setting a trap for them without knowing it. For example, if we specify a formal audience and the students don't fully understand the conventions of a formal dialect, we severely criticize their writing. However, if

we specify an informal audience, perhaps the students' peers, will we accept the informal dialect our students know so well?

Part of our concern in identifying rhetorical information is designating purpose. While we often state the purpose for a particular writing assignment, as writing teachers we aren't always sure how students ascertain what the purpose of an assignment actually is. How can teachers be sure they themselves recognize fully the purpose of an assignment? For example, when asked to argue for or against a proposition suggested by a reading selection, do student interpret the purpose as (a) displaying their writing skills for a particular type of writing or (b) imitating the style or argument proposed by the author of the reading selection or (c) presenting their beliefs on the subject to a perhaps sympathetic, perhaps hostile audience or (d) protecting themselves from criticism because they as yet don't have a position on the proposed question? If we specify a purpose along with an intended audience, how much attention do students pay to these points? Are students only concerned about our reactions to their prose, making our presence the only purpose for the essay, or are students' writing strategies influenced by an assignment's stated purpose?

The other important aspect to purpose is our own: what "hobby horses" do we ride, what expectations do we have that we're implying by our writing assignments but not recognizing ourselves? We assume that students have special interests, axes they want to grind but, in fact, such specialized concerns are products of an academic community: teachers have hidden agenda; students may not even know what they are. As Irvin Hashimoto

writes, teachers know little about how the hobby horses they ride affect their writing assignments and, ultimately, the way they evaluate the essays their students write.

Several researchers, investigating the influence discourse mode has on sentence complexity, believe that students must construct more complex sentences when they write arguments than they do when they write descriptions or stories. However, as James Hoetker and others have noted, we don't know how mode influences other aspects of student writing such as organization or diction nor are we sure whether specifying mode can increase students' chances for writing communicative texts. Hoetker suggests that a detailed discussion of what type of essay we want students to write may be detrimental: it may divert students' attention from the task at hand, causing them to repeat the instructions in our assignments rather than display their own writing skills. Karen Greenberg reports that she found no significant changes in her students' writing performance when she varied the cognitive demands of her writing assignments. Assignments that asked for less challenging modes of discourse, such as relating ideas, did not produce better or worse essays than assignments that asked for more challenging modes of discourse, such as evaluating ideas (Greenberg, 1981). Greenberg's writing assignments, however, had subtle rather than blatant differences in cognitive demands. Suppose those demands were more obvious? How would Greenberg's conclusions change?

In addition we aren't sure how students interpret writing assignments as texts. Text linguists and speech act theorists tell us that a communicative text combines two kinds of

information: text-presented knowledge, that is information encoded in the text, with world knowledge, that is the beliefs, understanding, assumptions, inferences, scripts, or plans we bring to the text from our experiences. Thus, in a writing assignment the language of the assignment and the general knowledge of the participants interact. From this interaction other texts, the students' essays, are produced.

When composing writing assignments, teachers often use criteria similar to the ones the FE Director and I applied to the writing assignment on Auden. But these standards judge text-presented knowledge, not world knowledge. We see this problem specifically when we analyze what went wrong with the wording of a writing assignment. At times students center their attention on phrases or sentences in a writing assignment that we may have provided as background information rather than salient parts of the assignment. Is this a mismatch explained by cognitive theory, as Leo Ruth and Sandra Murphy suggest, or by speech act theory? Do students view writing assignments as cooperative efforts at communication or linguistic puzzles designed to trip them up? Text linguists, cognitive psychologists, and artificial intelligence experts have only recently suggested ways of classifying world knowledge. We as yet don't have criteria that will allow us to evaluate writing assignments by estimating how our students perceive the information we present in writing assignments and how they combine that information with their understanding and experiences.

Finally, maybe writing teachers pay too much attention to writing assignments. As other researchers have noted, we learn to write because we have to: when we have something to write about, when the need for writing is immediate, and when we have an audience we know needs the communication, we write. For instance, when I finally realized that this Conference would take place, that my colleagues expected my presentation, and that I would be unable to be here myself to give the presentation from my notes, I wrote--furiously. The need was immediate; the audience and purpose clear. I was able to give this text more attention than I would have to an analysis of Auden's citizens. Perhaps Ken Macrorie phrased it best: "No one outside school ever writes anything called themes. Apparently, they are teachers' exercises, not really a kind of communication."

But to summarize and end. Mine has been the easiest section of this presentation on new contexts and paradigms for writing assignments because all I had to do was present some of the problems. As I proposed in the title for this presentation, we know more now about what we don't know. How better to find answers than identifying the questions?

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